

Operation

Story by Heike Hasenauer

R&R



SSG Carmen G. Maldonado

A HANDFUL of family members waited eagerly outside the international arrival terminal at Baltimore-Washington International Airport in Maryland Sept. 26 to catch the first glimpses of loved ones they hadn't seen in almost a year.

As TV crews jockeyed for the best positions from which to capture the most heartwarming scenes of first hugs, kisses and tears, 192 Soldiers — wearing desert battle-dress uniforms and carrying duffel bags and rucksacks — began filing into the terminal.

They were the first troops deployed in Iraq to arrive in the United States through the Operation Iraqi Freedom Rest and Recuperation Leave Program.

For SPC Corey Mann of the 18th Military Police Brigade's 382nd MP



Heike Hasenauer

While waiting for connecting flights, Soldiers take a shuttle to a nearby hotel for complimentary showers.

Just off the plane from Iraq, SPC James Short holds his eight-week-old daughter Rachel Elena.

Detachment, a Reserve unit from San Diego, Calif., stepping off the plane at BWI was more special than for most air travelers.

After being deployed for seven months, Mann was excited about what other arriving international passengers typically take for granted — being on U.S. soil.

“I just want to relax, see family and eat lots of good food — no MREs,” said Mann, whose unit is assigned to the Baghdad Police Department, where the U.S. Soldiers teach classes in international human rights, the concepts of freedom of movement and domestic-violence prevention.

Mann’s parents, in San Diego, eagerly awaited his arrival. His girlfriend, unaware of his visit, would be completely surprised, he said.

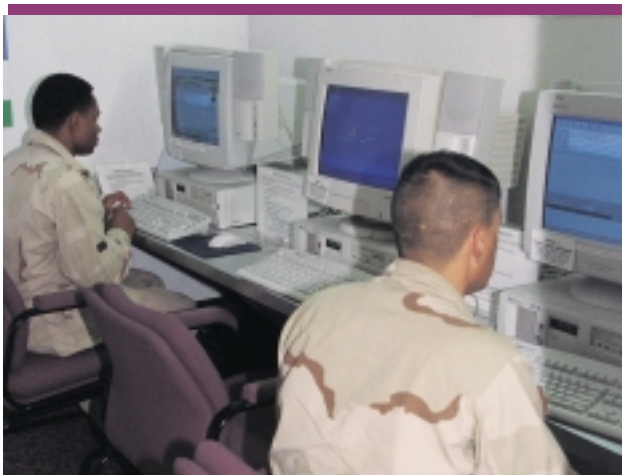
Another returning Soldier, SPC Adrian Dupree, flew into the arms of his girlfriend of 10 years, Mirasha Pompey, the woman he planned to marry during his two weeks’ leave.

SPC Willy Sharp from the Babenhausen, Germany,-based 1st Bn., 27th Field Artillery, was heading to Grand Rapids, Mich., to see his wife and eight-year-old daughter. “Besides my family, I’ve missed showers and people I can understand. I’m absolutely going to spend time with family, rest, and hit the mall and my favorite coffee shop,” he said.

Under the R&R program, eligible Soldiers and Defense Department civilians who have served 89 days in-theater can take 15 days’ chargeable leave and opt to take a free flight to the United States or deplane at Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany, where flights stop to refuel.

The program initially transported up to 270 people per day, providing them a respite from a hostile-fire and imminent-danger-pay area where they’re to be stationed for one year.

SPC Glenn Barker, an automations



Returning Soldiers use computer terminals, made available to them at BWI Airport’s USO center, to make onward reservations.

technician with the 22nd Signal Bde. in Darmstadt, Germany, has been deployed since January 2002 to Kuwait and Iraq. He elected to fly to the United States to visit his father in Manassas, Va.

SGT Kevin Williams from Headquarters and HQs Company, 173rd Infantry Bde., in Vicenza, Italy, was on his way to visit his son. After entering the terminal at BWI, Williams took advantage of facilities offered by the USO, among them computers. He sent numerous e-mails, in an effort to get family members and friends together, he said. “I want to do everything I can with my family — just spend quality time with them.”

SGT Felix Gomez, also from the 173rd, was headed to Texas to see his two children, who have been staying with his mother.

One of 22 engineers from his unit deployed to Iraq, Gomez works with

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explosive-ordnance disposal units to clean up unexploded ordnance.

“I’ve missed my wife and kids most,” said SGT Merle Judd, a cook assigned to HHC, 1st Bde., 101st Airborne Division. He’d been away from his home base at Fort Campbell, Ky., since March.

“The war may be over in Iraq, but it’s not really over,” said CPT Bryan Sims, a family nurse practitioner from Fort Hood, Texas, deployed with the 21st Combat Support Hospital 70 miles northwest of Baghdad. “The operational tempo has increased, rather than decreased.

“We’re the central northern hospital in Iraq and have seen more than 7,000 patients since April. We see 150 outpatients per day and admit about 100 per month,” Sims said. “Our hospital managed the victims of the explosion at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad. We took in 38 patients in 24 hours — just in the first wave of casualties.

“I’m looking forward to quiet,” Sims said. “In Iraq there’s a generator at every turn. There are explosions. And I’m often awakened to help tend to patients.”

Sims, like many of the Soldiers, longed for the comfort and love of family. “The first thing I’m going to do is hold my wife and two sons,” he said.

None of the Soldiers interviewed talked about how difficult it would be for them to return to Iraq at the end of their two weeks. “You cross that bridge when you get to it,” one of them said. “For now, this is the greatest blessing. It’ll last us until we can come home to stay.”

Leave begins at midnight on the day a program participant gets off his flight and ends when he signs in for his return flight, said LTC Lorelei Coplen, an Army spokeswoman for the program.

Army officials are working to add more entry ports in the continental United States, and plan to increase the number of daily flights to allow more people to participate in the program daily, said R&R program spokesman Walt Wood. 📧